DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 751 RC 012 925

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TITLE Reflections on the Education of Native American Children, Focusing on Navajo Children.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 32p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alienation; American Indian Culture; *American Indian Education; American Indians; Bilingual Education; Boarding Schools; Cultural Influences; *Culture Conflict; *Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethnic Bias; Multicultural Education; School District Autonomy; Self Concept; Stereotypes; *Student Adjustment; Teacher Attitudes; Tribal Sovereignty; Tribes
IDENTIFIERS *Navajo (Nation)

ABSTRACT

Offered as an introduction to some of the pertinent studies and personalities concerning the education of Native Americans, with emphasis on the education of Navajo children, this paper traces the history of Navajo education from 1868 to the present. A discussion of the shortcomings of early schools for Navajos and other Native Americans is followed by a description of the changes effected in Navajo education after World War II. Various ideas about why Native Americans in general and Navajo students in particular fail to make more satisfactory adjustments to school life are discussed. Cultural biases and stereotyped images of Native Americans which are held by members of the dominant culture are noted. Biases in teacher attitudes toward American Indian children is discussed. The paper concludes with advances being made in Navajo education and the steps, including bilingual and bicultural education and local control of schools, which the Navajo people are taking to ensure quality education for their children. (CM)

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ED207751

REFLECTIONS ON THE EDUCATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN, FOCUSING ON NAVAJO CHILDREN

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Spring, 1981

RC 01 2925

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There is no shortage of material on the education of Native Americans. A survey of the literature published in 1968 by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare lists 708 references.[1] As for the Navajos, few people on earth have been studied more thoroughly. Peter Iverson's, The Navajos--A Critical Bibliography, published in 1976, lists 189 entries.[2] This paper is offered as an introduction to some of the pertinent studies and personalities concerning the education of Native Americans. The beginning teacher will find plenty of grist here, whereas the experienced may find either a new reference or perhaps the reinforcement of a concept already held.

The education of Native Americans has heretofore been tragic, a story of untold misery and countless lost lives. On the Navajo Reservation today, new forces are gathering which offer hope for the education of Native Americans and, for that matter, for all minority groups. I refer to the placing in the hands of "local citizens" the responsibility for their own schools, a change which has resulted in increased respect and attention given to the culture of the local community. Among Navajos there is a growing trend to base school board membership on interest and concern rather than the number of years spent

in school. Some members of the all-Navajo school board of the reservation's best-known school have little formal schooling. Robert A. Roessel, principal founder of the school, believes that in referring to that board, "The most important message Rough Rock Demonstration School can teach is how a democracy works."[3] To Roessel and his ilk, the hope and future of Native American education lies in the concept of letting those concerned manage their own schools as they see fit.

The Navajo Reservation covers an area equal to the states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire combined. Another way of grasping the size of this vast expanse of land is to compare it with the King Ranch in south Texas, the nation's largest. It consists of approximately one million acres: the Navajo Reservation is 16 times as large. Unfortunately, most of this area is semiarid or arid, and although it has spectacular scenic beauty, there is not enough water for much farming; the grazing of hardy sheep and goats is just about all the land can be used for. Cattle and horses also graze some of this land, although never on any large scale. In recent years the discovery of uranium, oil, natural gas, and timber has increased the value of some of the

land but has not provided very many jobs. The population of the tribe is difficult to ascertain, but most experts put it at around 130,000 inhabitants. When one realizes that "even if the Navajo utilized their land and its resources to the greatest possible extent, experts believe that not more than 40,000 people could extract an adequate living from it,"[4] the value of an education and a firm knowledge of English becomes critical. Most Navajo youngsters will have to leave the reservation if they expect a standard of living anywhere near that of the general population.

Formal schooling of Navajo children has a history that goes back over 100 years: "The Navajos, in their 1868 treaty with the United States, agreed to compel their children between six and sixteen to attend school, and we the United States agreed, in turn, to provide a school and a teacher for every 30 children who could be induced or compelled to attend."[5] Early schools were dismal failures; the Navajos were apathetic about attendance and the government showed even less interest. Every aspect of education as presented in the early years was anathema to the Navajos, even down to the food the schools served. At first children would run away and hide for weeks at a time

rather than go to school. The parents, unused to forcing or disciplining their young, just waited for them to return. In 1892 a Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported an enrollment of 75 in a tribe of more than 16,000.[6] Schools were of litte relevance to the Navajos in those early years. By 1903 attendance was up to 300 children at three boarding schools.[7] Often those who attended school in the early days were from the poorest families whose main aim was to take advantage of the free room and board provided. "Most children shunned the regimented life which was as different as possible from the serene, outdoor existence, where days, weeks, and even years were not divided into work times and play times."[8] The early schools were strict and run on a military schedule. One early student remembers, "We marched to the dining room, we marched back to the dormitory, and we marched to our classrooms. We marched to church Sunday mornings."[9] Discipline was harsh during this time; for that matter, it was harsh in the white schools as well.

Ruth Underhill, in her classic work, The Navajos, presents a picture of how early education might have been more effective for being similar to the old family teaching method. The pioneer-type teacher would have resided

in a cluster of Navajo dwellings. He would have lived and worked exactly like the people, moving with the flocks as they moved and giving instruction in the evenings just as grandfather did with his myths. There were few Navajos who spoke English, and those few preferred to use their hard-earned knowledge to make money as interpreters or businessmen.[10] Alas, if only just a few early teachers could have lived and moved with the Navajos, what a difference they might have made.

During the early years boarding schools were the only practical means of having a school on the reservation; in fact they are still common today. Navajos prefer to live separated from other clans or families and, with a pastoral society living on an open range, this was and still is a good way to keep flocks separated. In the past, with very poor roads or none at all, school buses were of little use. Thus, in the early years there was no possible way to have a school unless the children remained overnight. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) ran these earliest boarding schools, but later various Christian denominations began to establish their own schools as well; these latter were frequently connected with a hospital.

Until the 1930's the prevailing attitude in all schools on the reservation, governmental and private, was to "catch 'em quickly and change 'em completely."[11] It was strictly forbidden to speak Navajo at school and those who dared were severely punished:

> If anyone talked in Navajo, that week the person's name would be written down. On Saturday the punishment came--boys' pants would be brought in, which the girls had to wear; the boys who were caught speaking Navajo were forced to put on girls' clothing. They would go around this way where they would be seen--the girls in boys' pants and the boys in short dresses.[12]

It was not until 1940 that the idea of using Navajo in the schools began to catch hold. Textbooks of Navajo stories were printed and for the first time the children were allowed to speak Navajo in school. Stories were printed with English on one side and Navajo on the other. By the use of diacritical marks, a fairly close approximation of the Navajo sound system could be achieved using the English alphabet. The emphasis was never on teaching Navajo; it was simply used as an aid in the teaching of English.[13] This use of bilingual textbooks actually showed some success; when World War II started, however, lack of funds caused the idea to be dropped.

The biggest single change in the history of Navajo education took place after the Second World War. During the war some 15,000 Navajos left the reservation to work in war-related industries in the West while 3,600 served on active duty in the Armed Forces.[14] By 1946 the Navajos themselves began to demand more and better educational facilities. The returning veterans and workers who had been exposed to new experiences and ways of life served as a powerful stimulus in raising the educational expectations of their tribe.

Conditions on the reservation in 1946 were appalling. Only 100 of over 4,000 miles of tracks and roads were paved.[15] One simply cannot use a standard vehicle for much of the reservation without paved roads. During the late 1940 s Native Americans in the United States averaged a little less than six years of schooling, whereas the Navajos averaged less than one year. Eighty percent of all Navajos were illiterate and of the 26,000 children of school age, less than 6,000 were enrolled in schools. federal, public and mission.[16] By the mid 1950s these three types of schools could accommodate about 14,000 children or one-half the school-age population. In 1958 there were 28,000 children in school and by 1965

the figure had jumped to 40,000, almost three times the number of students in school just 20 years before.[17] In 1965 the average number of years in school for a Navajo had risen to eight years, a considerable change from the miserable conditions just after the war.

In 1971, William J. Benham, director of the Navajo Area Education Division of the BIA, could report not only that more than 90 percent of all school age Navajo children were in school but also that over 1300 students were attending various colleges and universities on BIA scholarships.[18] With newly paved roads covering much of the reservation, school buses were now practical and state-run day schools were becoming more common. A child might have to ride a long way to school, but at least he could return to his family at night and not have to be separated from them for months at a time.

With most Navajo children in school, the tribe began to question the quality of education, becoming more and more vocal. Traditionally reservation schools taught white middle class values with little attention, if any, paid to the Native American's culture. Professors Murry L. and Rosalie H. Wax, from the University of Kansas, have been studying the educational problems of Native American

youth for the past 25 years, focusing on the Sioux. Murry Wax has developed the concept of a vacuum ideology, according to which the Native American's mind is seen as empty. It is not believed that he has another ideology or value system but that he has none.[19] This attitude all too often pervades the thinking of white teachers of Native Americans.

The Waxes first became interested in Native American students in 1959 when they were asked to conduct a workshop for Native American college students. On the second day of the conference, Murry Wax delivered a set of lectures on the world view and religious orientation of traditional Plains Indians.

> When he began to quote respectfully from traditional myths, the air in the room became electric with intensity, and afterwards several of the quieter and most withdrawn young men rushed forward to mention things their elders had done or said. They also remarked that never had they heard a teacher or other professional speak of Indian traditional customs in this way--that is, as vital, meaningful, and significant, rather than as superstitious, primitive, or extinct.[20]

School administrators have traditionally viewed the Native American's cultural background not as different but rather as non-existent. Reformers have looked at the Native American's culture as a source of difficulty rather than considering that the patterns of interaction among Native

Americans and whites might be the problem. The melting pot concept works when people want to become part of the American mainstream, something Native Americans have never been very eager to do.

Darcy McNickle, a Flathead Native American and noted anthropologist, author, and scholar, wrote in 1962 that:

> Indian characteristics exist and remain in play after centuries of Indian-White association. The Dominican monks who wrote in 1544 described Indians as not acquisitive and satisfied with having enough to get along on from day to day were describing traits that are complained of in modern times, by aggressive, hustling, white men.[21]

After 400 years of contact with Europeans, Native American cultural traits persist to a much larger degree than previously realized. John F. Bryde says, "In the whole history of Indian education one fact emerges with startling clarity: very little effort has been made to really understand the Indian."[22] Bryde has spent a lifetime not, as he puts it, working with Indians but rather learning from them. He has a Ph.D. in psychology, is fluent in Sioux and has worked as superintendent of the nation's largest private school for Native Americans, Holy Rosary Mission School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. He is one of the few

writers today who is fully qualified to speak about the psychological problems of Native American students, particularly adolescents. In Bryde's opinion by the time they reach high school, Native American students are alienated from both the society of their school and that of their parents. It is this alienation which leads to the "cross-over phenomenon," which means the common occurrence of previously good students losing interest in school, usually high school. To Bryde the concept of alienation appears to be central to explaining loss of interest. He "found that alienation, with its components of powerlessness, normalness and helplessness, increased as school achievement decreased."[23] School administrators often blame this phenomenon on the lack of oral teaching of English as a Second Language. The Waxes place heavy emphasis on the rise of the peer society and the failure of educators to harness that society to the performance of educational tasks.[24] Regardless of the reasons, Native American students in the advanced grades frequently lack the linguistic facility--in speaking, reading, comprehending--to deal with the formal classwork required of them.

Professor Miles V. Zintz, a recognized authority on the education of minority group children and author of Education Across Cultures, reports in a study of the New Mexico public schools:

> The Indian population became more educationally retarded as they progressed through the elementary school. Retardation was 7 months in the third grade, 11 months in the fourth grade, 14 months in the fifth grade, and 15 months in the sixth grade.[25]

Another study conducted in 1957 of some 9,751 Navajo children in public schools revealed that in only 6 percent of the cases were students at the grade level of achievement for their age; 40 percent were retarded at least one year, and 54 percent were retarded two or more years.[26]

What are some of the reasons given today for the failure of Native Americans in general and Navajo students in particular to make more satisfactory adjustments to school life? I am reminded of Murry Wax's concept of the vacuum ideology and John Bryde's alienation theory.

In the 1980s Native American schools and the philosophies behind them are quite different than they were just 20 years ago. Gone or going are the days of

the "catch 'em and change 'em" philosophy. Attention is now being paid to the Native Americans' own language and customs. There is an ever-growing convinction among people concerned with Indian education at large that this failure to respect and build on the heritage of Indian culture ". . . has been the single, heaviest burden on the back of Indian education."[27] Dr. Karl Menninger, in 1968, speaking at a meeting in Window Rock, Arizona, said:

> Someone has committed a crime in making the Indian feel ashamed of his own heritage. You cannot crush a child's spirit and then expect him to rise up with initiative, pride and imagination. . . . In the western nations their history of progress is based on their heritage. The same thing must also be true for the Navajo. . . . The worst thing that can happen to a people is to have their hope knocked out.[28]

Our own culture is riddled with anti-Native American beliefs and values. The Lone Ranger and his laconic sidekick Tonto (Spanish for fool) still ride in the lives of millions of American youngsters. Every Halloween millions of Anglo-Saxon children dress up as play Indians. Television portrays the Native American as a warring primitive, with an occasional basket weaver thrown in for "educational value." One television critic reported that:

> In 1972-73, we saw only two programs which dealt with a twentieth-century Native American and the problems he faced in white society. Usually the Native American is presented, not only historically, but as the enemy, and in television cartoons he is treated with callous humor, in the poorest taste.[29]

In Custer Died for Your Sins, Vine Deloria notes the fact that "We often hear 'give it back to the Indians' when a gadget fails to work. It's a terrible thing for a people to realize that society has set aside all non-working gadgets for their exclusive use."[30]

Although few people have been as closely studied and examined from every cultural aspect as have the Native Americans, ". . . few if any textbook writers take advantage of these sources; nor is there any evidence that they have ever studied them or are even familiar with them."[31] In testimony given before the Senate Committee on Indian Education in 1969, the Indian Historical Society stated: "There is not one Indian child who has not come home in shame and tears after one of these sessions [referring to a reading lesson in a school textbook] in which he is taught that his people were dirty, animal-like, something less than human beings. . . ."[32] Is it any wonder that Native Americans lack a sense of pride in their culture? In 1958 the third grade Macmillan

reader used in the Phoenix Area BIA schools contained the following: "In those days the Navajos did not farm or raise sheep as they do now. They and some other tribes traveled from place to place. They were wild and liked to fight."[33]

As a result of the egregious nature of existing textbooks, an independent Native American publishing house, The Indian Historian Press, has begun to publish books about Native Americans, written by Indian scholars, offered to both schools and the general public. "The fact remains that the Bureau-directed schools [BIA] have the worst and most outdated textbooks and instructional materials. They permit Indian students to be subjected to the most outrageous research programs and psychological surveys."[34] If it were possible to calculate the number of hours spent by anthropologists doing field work in the Ramah area southeast of Gallup, New Mexico, in relation to either geographical area or population, it could probably be demonstrated that the Ramah Navajos are the most studied people in the world.[35] Yet, it is only recently that any of this vast storehouse of accumulated research has ever reached the pages of a school textbook.

Native Americans are demanding that schools place more emphasis on Native American culture and less on middle-class white culture. White culture is confusing enough for the middle-class Anglo-Saxon; how much more confusing must it be for Native Americans. Our modern culture is changing so fast that not only are cultural conditions different from generation to generation, but today parents' values often change while the children are growing, with the result that the children do not get a constant, stable view of life. Since behavioral deviation can be expected even in a homogeneous culture where only one set of values is operating, a fortiori such deviation may be expected where people are living under the stress of two conflicting sets of cultural values.[38] Imagine how confused a Native American child must be when life is confusing to the white child; in addition the Native American's culture itself is constantly changing, perhaps at an even faster rate than the white culture.

Robert Young, after years of experience with the Navajos and as one of the first whites to master their language, remarked in The Navajo Yearbook of 1957:

> Today the code of ethics and the cultural values of traditional Navajo society, like the religion, are undergoing rapid changes under the . . . impact of

> non-Navajo society and institutions. The framework remains, but it is rapidly disintegrating in the face of the new order and a new way of life, and the traditional pattern is no longer as valid as a generalization as it was even twenty years ago.[37]

Add to this constant state of flux the clash of changing cultural values within both cultures and it becomes clear that John Bryde has a point when he speaks about the extreme cultural alienation that Native American students feel.

Differences between the white and Navajo culture have been well documented. Miles Zintz in Education Across Cultures presents a clear, concise contrast of the two cultural value systems, one taught by the schools and the other learned at home.[38] The following examples illustrate how differences in cultures cause problems for Navajo students from the first day they arrive at school. The first, not knowing English, is one of the most obvious sources of difficulty for a Navajo first-grader. As late as 1970, over 70 percent of all BIA first-graders spoke little or no English when they came to school. Even in the public schools, which, because they tend to be closer to the edges of the reservation, have greater contact with white society, over 50 percent of the first-graders are unable to speak English well enough to do grade-level work.[39]

The traditional Navajo is used to living from birth in a "warm circle of family and clan mates. Never had he needed to go out among strangers and make his way by charm or aggression."[40] To a Navajo youngster, accustomed to the protecting presence of his clan and family, suddenly being thrown into an environment full of strangers who might as well be speaking Russian must indeed be trying.

Gladys Reichard, one of America's most distinguished anthropologists and one of the world's foremost authorities on the Navajos, makes the following observations in Weaving a Navajo Blanket. The Navajo word for teach means to show and that is how Reichard learned to weave.[41] She lived with a Navajo family during the early 1930s and participated with the younger children in the entire process of rug weaving. Reichard writes that a child begins to weave when she can complete an entire rug by herself; often this first product is good enough to sell to a trader.[42] The point is that Navajos do not like to try something new until they are sure they have a reasonable chance of success. The concept of "never mind if you fail, we all learn by our mistakes" is not at all acceptable to the Navajos to whom it is especially important to save face.

In 1968 Ralph Nader reviewed a recently released President's task force report on Indian education which stated that too many BIA employees have unconscious anti-Indian attitudes; they are convinced that Indians are really hopelessly incompetent.[43] An explanation of the above attitude appeared in the November, 1967, issue of Scientific American; the article in question covers an American Psychological Association meeting where one of the papers presented examined the question: Can a teacher's expectations as to his pupils' performance affect that performance? Apparently so, reports Scientific American. When teachers were told that certain children were likely to "bloom" intellectually, those children (whose names had been picked at random) showed greater gains during the school year than did the other, so-called normal children. These same teachers were also asked at the end of the year to describe their children. They characterized the "bloomers" as having a better chance of becoming successful, as being significantly more interesting, curious and happy, and as somewhat more appealing, adjusted and affectionate. This same study reported that half of a group of experimenters were led to believe that their subjects (in this case rats) were

bred for superior learning ability; the other half were told that their rats were genetically inferior. The brighter rats showed learning superior to the "dull" ones in both maze and Skinner box tasks. The reason may have been that the allegedly "bright" rats were handled more--and handled more gently--than the allegedly "dull" animals.[44]

How often do Native American children find full acceptance by the teachers at their school? A 1966 Health, Education and Welfare report (The Coleman Report) indicated that 25 percent of those teaching Indian children would prefer to be teaching elsewhere and that only 1 percent of the BIA teachers were Indians.[45] This suggests that most Navajo children seldom find full acceptance in the eyes of their teachers.

It does not take children long to learn what is expected of them; when schools expect Native American children to accept the middle-class urban values of their teachers and textbooks, it is no wonder that these children frequently fall behind and appear dull and listless. Apathetic is a convenient label for students who do not happen to agree with the program school officials are pushing.

An example of how a positive self-image can work for a person was exhibited by Billy Mills, a Sioux and winner of the gold medal for the 10,000-meter race at the Tokyo Olympics. Mills literally talked himself into winning that race. Besides training for two years, running twice a day, seven days a week, totalling 100 miles a week, at least six times a day he would close his eyes and visualize breaking the tape at the Olympic games. "This was implanted in my mind so strong, I could close my eyes and I could hear 85,000 to 90,000 people in the stadium screaming."[46] One of the things that makes Mills' feat so spectacular is that prior to the Olympics he was not even listed among the world's top ten 10,000-meter runners. When Mills crossed the finish line, the first words of the Japanese official who came running after him were: "Who are you?" How can we expect Native Americans to know who they are when they are expected to forget their traditions and accept an incomprehensible future? In Tokyo Mills felt for the first time in his entire life that somebody cared to know who he was.

To learn who the Navajos are takes years, and the children will not begin to trust a new teacher until they have had time to observe how that new teacher feels

about them. As Paul Jones, former Navajo Tribal Chairman, said in a speech welcoming the new Navajo Agency Superintendent: "We Navajos will look you over for a couple of years, and then we'll decide whether we are for you or against you."[47] Frequently a teacher does not stay with the Navajos long enough for the students to fully know him.

The educational winds of change on the Navajo Reservation today signal a complete reversal of the days when the schools forcibly forbade students to speak their own language. Not only are schools beginning to accept the use of the Navajo language, they are beginning to accept the Navajo culture as well. An educator-linguist who grew up on the Navajo Reservation states: "My studies in linguistics, particularly in sociolinguistics, have made me aware that bilingual and bicultural education is imperative if Navajo children are to be at all successful in our schools."[48] Today the concept of bilingual and bicultural education is being tried on the reservation and nationwide. "Native languages have come to be recognized, not as encumbrances and impediments but as definite tools to be fitted into the educational program."[49]

School boards composed of Navajos are now in operation at BIA schools. The Rough Rock Demonstration

School is run by a school board composed entirely of Navajos who, as a collective body, see to it that stress is placed on the teaching of the Navajo language and culture. At Rough Rock:

> We want to instill in our youngsters a sense of pride in being Indian. We want to show them that they can be Indian and American at the same time, that they can take the best from each way of life and combine it into something viable.[50]

Robert Roessel believes that, "Indian students can be subjected to a concept of education labeled 'both/and' in that Indian students can be taught that they can be both Indian and American at the same time."[51]

It is at Rough Rock and schools like it that the future of Native American education lies; they are examples of democracy at work where members of the community, instead of professionals or experts, concern themselves with their own school. At Rock Point, a neighboring BIA school which is run on a similar philosophy, a visiting educational consultant reported the following:

> One group of children would work at one end of the room, in English with the Anglo teacher, the other group at opposite end of the room, covering the same material in Navajo under the direction of an aid. At the end of each fifteen minutes, the groups would switch. The children were reminded that in this part of the room we speak English, there, we talk Navajo.[52]

Navajos are proud of their culture and language, and schools are beginning to incorporate this fact into their curriculum. What a difference it will make for Navajo children to come to a school where they can freely use the language of their home and see their parents taking an active part in the administration of their school.

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